CLAIMS

We claim:

1.   A computer system for comparison shopping over one or more networks, the system comprising:

one or more central processing units (CPUs), one or more memories, and one or more network interfaces to one or more networks;

a bid agent process adapted to determine whether one or more products are described in information communicated to the user, where the bid agent process is further adapted to determine whether the user chooses to receive bids on the one or more products described in the information and adapted to create a bid request if the user chooses to receive bids on the one or more products described in the information; and

a broker that sends the bid request over one or more of the network interfaces to one or more stores, the broker using one or more values of a closeness measure to determine one or more related products associated with a selected product, where the one or more values of the closeness measure are determined using attributes of the selected product and the one or more related products, the bid request requesting a bid on the selected product and at least one of the one or more related products, and wherein the broker receives bids from the stores and resends the bids over one or more of the network interfaces to a user.

2.   A system, as in claim 1, where the bid request has a bid protocol, and where the bid protocol includes a product identifier and a bid price.

3.   A system, as in claim 1, where one or more of the stores re-bids if the user rejects a prior bid.

4.   A system, as in claim 1, where one or more of the stores combines a product with one or more second store products when submitting a corresponding bid.

5.   A system, as in claim 1, where one or more of the bids have one or more conditions.

6.   A system, as in claim 1, where the bid agent transmits the bid request to the broker.

7.   A system, as in claim 6, where the bid agent further sends one or more bid lists to the user, the one or more bid lists containing bids from one or more of the stores about the selected product and bids from one or more of the stores about the at least one of the one or more related products.

8.   A system, as in claim 6, wherein the broker compiles the bids from the stores into a bid list, and sends the bid list to the bid agent.

9.   A system, as in claim 6, where the bid agent notifies the user that the bid request is ready for the one or more products described in the Web page, whereby the user can consent to submission by the bid agent of the bid request to the one or more stores.

10.   A system, as in claim 1, where the broker determines the one or more values of the closeness measure, and where the broker determines the one or more related products by determining that the one or more values of the closeness measure corresponding to the one or more related products are smaller than a replacement factor.

11.   A system, as in claim 1, where the broker determines the one or more values of the closeness measure, and where the broker determines each value of the closeness measure by determining weighted attributes by multiplying attributes of the selected product and the one or more related products by predetermined weight factors, the broker further determining each value of the closeness measure by determining a sum of differences between weighted attributes for the selected product and weighted attributes for one of the one or more related products.

12.	A system, as in claim 1, where the one or more values of the closeness measure are stored in the one or more memories and at least one of the one or more values of the closeness measure has been previously determined.

13.	A system, as in claim 1, where the closeness measure is a distance.

14.	A system, as in claim 6, where the conditions included any one or more of the following: a selected product price, a shipping method, a shipping time, a handling method, a product packaging, a set of product delivery instructions, a provision of better deals for bundling two or more products, a recommendation of comparable products, related products, or both, a provision of customer service programs including express checkout in online stores, wish lists, gift registries, reward programs, discount for certain shopping groups, custom-configurable products, and email notification services.

15.	A system, as in claim 14, where the one or more related products include any one or more of the following: a replacement product, an up-sell product, a down-sell product, a cross-sell product, a combination product to be used with the selected product, an alternative or substitute product, and a product with a related use.

16.	A system, as in claim 1, where the user consents to receiving bids from the stores before the bids from all the stores are sent.

17.	A system, as in claim 1, where a history of the bids is stored in one or more of the memories.

18.	A system, as in claim 17, where the stored bids are used for a later bid request.

19.	A system, as in claim 1, where the broker determines the stores from which to solicit the bids.

20.   A method for comparison shopping over a network comprising the steps of:

determining whether one or more selected products are described in information communicated to the user;

determining whether the user chooses to receive bids on the one or more selected products described in the information;

creating a bid request if the user chooses to receive bids on the one or more selected products described in the information;

using one or more values of a closeness measure to determine one or more related products associated with the one or more selected products, where the one or more values of the closeness measure are determined using attributes of the one or more selected products and the one or more related products;

sending a bid request over one or more network interfaces to one or more stores, the bid request requesting a bid on the one or more selected products and at least one of the one or more related products; and

receiving bids from the stores and resending the bids over one or more of the network interfaces to a user.

21.   A computer program product performing the steps of:

determining whether one or more selected products are described in information communicated to the user;

determining whether the user chooses to receive bids on the one or more selected products described in the information;

creating a bid request if the user chooses to receive bids on the one or more selected products described in the information;

using one or more values of a closeness measure to determine one or more related products associated with the one or more selected products, where the one or more values of the closeness measure are determined using attributes of the one or more selected products and the one or more related products;

sending the bid request over one or more network interfaces to one or more stores, the bid request requesting a bid on the one or more selected products and at least one of the one or more related products; and

receiving bids from the stores and resending the bids over the one or more network interfaces to a user.

22.   A computer system for comparison shopping over one or more networks, the system comprising:

one or more central processing units (CPUs), one or more memories, and one or more network interfaces to one or more networks; and

a bid agent process that determines whether one or more products are described in information communicated to a user, where the bid agent process determines whether the user chooses to receive bids on the one or more products described in the information, where the bid agent process prepares a bid request when the user chooses to receive bids on the one or more products described in the information, and where the bid agent process communicates the bid request over the one or more network interfaces and communicates to the user any bids received over the one or more network interfaces.